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SUBJECT: UNHCR: TOWARDS PROTECTION OR RESETTLEMENT?

REF: ASMARA 280

Classified By: CDA Melinda Tabler-Stone for reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) The UNHCR office in Asmara may begin focusing less on resettlement and more on protection issues, according to Christina Linner (protect) from the UNHCR Inspector General's Office. During a regularly planned inspection of the UNHCR office in Asmara, Ms. Linner told Poloff that she is considering recommending an increased focus on protection for the more than 4,000 Somali refugees in the Massawa camp. Given her assessment of the office thus far, she does not see resettlement as a viable option in the short term. Thus far, only Canada and Australia have been able to resettle the Somalis, and only in small numbers (reftel). Meanwhile, she continued, overcrowding and lack of funds and resources in the camp's schools continued to be a growing problem. Gender-based violence and FGM were also pervasive.

¶2. (C) Currently, the UNHCR office in Asmara is allowed monthly visits to the refugee camp in Massawa. The protection officers are accompanied at all times by representatives from the Eritrean government's (GSE) Office of Refugee Affairs (ORA). Ms. Linner believes that right now relations between UNHCR and ORA are relatively smooth, especially considering that the inspection team was able to get visas for Eritrea and travel permits to Massawa. While UNHCR's primary goal is resettlement, she doesn't want to press the GSE to allow resettlement officials to visit the Massawa camp, a move which might strain UNHCR relations with the government. Instead, she believes getting additional resources for the camp would be a more feasible objective. Additionally, she continued, this would be a better way to get the donor community involved. Both Ms. Linner and Poloff agreed that the donor community would also benefit from semi-annual updates from UNHCR, focusing on specific dynamics of the refugee populations in Eritrea (Ethiopians, Somalis, and Sudanese).

¶3. (C) Ms. Linner also expressed concern about the 146 Sudanese refugees in Eritrea. While she initially thought about localized resettlement in Eritrea, PolOff informed her that the GSE has a history of recruiting Sudanese and Ethiopians into resistance groups.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: Ms. Linner's comments do not represent a formal request for increased funds or resources at this time. However, she told Poloff that an increased focus on protection will likely be in her recommendations to the UNHCR office in Asmara and that she would push the office towards this direction.

